

Uprooted: A Study of Cinematic Tone

An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)

by

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Abstract

When a film is marketed as a particular genre, audiences expect the story to follow a general set of conventions. For instance, viewers are accustomed to watching couples fall in and out of love, with love usually earning the final victory, in most romantic comedies. With my thesis, I wanted to challenge myself to make a short film that transitioned between two genres, to create a variety of tones. This began with a script, continued with the cast and crew, and ended with an editing timeline that helped the story flow from one emotion to another. The resulting film taught me how the various pieces of the production puzzle fit together to sculpt a story with multiple tones. From here, I hope my thesis will inspire other students to not restrict themselves to genre constraints and tell stories that contain layered atmospheres.

Acknowledgements

Over the course of this project, many people have helped me in creative and academic ways. Without the support of these people, the film would not have been completed and I would not have received the fulfillment this project gave to me. It began with Chris Flook, my thesis advisor, and grew from there into a packed production. From the beginning, my cast and crewmembers of Austin Mason, Chris Keaton, and Anthony Campagna gave me their support and endless talents. Austin and Chris gave phenomenal performances that carried the pathos of the story. And there is so much to be said of Anthony's acting abilities and incredible technical skills behind the camera. I cannot imagine a future without continued collaboration and friendship between the four of us.

I am also indebted to Felicia Keen for her long hours in the audio suite, Janie Fulling for her creative contributions to the script and her attention to detail, Micah Holtgraves for his hard work and perfectionism for visuals, Christina Valdez for her artistic talents and invisibility behind-the-scenes, Sam Noble for his design capabilities and problem-solving skills, Nick Sanchez for his commitment and generosity, and Lydia Lucas for jumping in the production last minute to give us a hand. Beyond these principal crewmembers, I am also so thankful for Beatrice and Amy Cooper who gave their time to bring the character of Alice to life. The entire staff at the Digital Corps lent our team the resources needed to push our technical and storytelling abilities forward.

In addition, the faculty at Cooper Nursing at Ball State University showed our team generosity by allowing us to film in their labs. Another special thanks should be extended to Charity Coffman for her time and assisting us in the pivotal hospital scene. Beyond the visuals,

this scene worked thanks to a wonderful score composed and performed by Grant Ebert. This score came to life with the help of Chris Keaton, Dan Edwards, Stan Sollars, Ryan Lehnertz, and Nathan Sheryak.

Beyond Muncie, a tremendous amount of support came from the Elian family, including my brother-in-law David, my beautiful sister and part-time actress Brianne, and my bubbly star and nephew, Kai. Of course, my wonderful parents Tim and Tanya, my biggest supporters of all, always encouraged me to pursue my passions and put ideas into action. Here are those passions and ideas, summed up in one final film at Ball State. This production will always represent a slice of my life, a memory of my time during senior year, when I was surrounded by some of the most talented and loving people I have yet to encounter. This film is called 'Uprooted' and I am very proud of the work that went into it. I hope you enjoy.

Artist's Statement

After submitting my proposal, I dove headfirst into production on what ultimately became a film called *Uprooted*. Through a collaborative pre-production period, I assembled an exciting group of student filmmakers. Amongst the fifteen cast and crewmembers were Austin Mason, Chris Keaton, Anthony Campagna, Felicia Keen, Janie Fulling, Micah Holtgraves, Christina Valdez, Sam Noble, Nick Sanchez, and Lydia Lucas. With these talented filmmakers on board, we were ready to launch into production. I had worked with many of these people prior to *Uprooted*, which, paired with previous TCOM experience, helped me feel prepared for the production.

Throughout my time in the Telecommunications department, I collaborated with many talented individuals in a variety of roles. I had directing, producing, cinematography, and editing experiences that made me feel comfortable in wearing many hats. Had I not developed these skills prior to the project, I do not believe I would have been prepared to tackle *Uprooted* and the many new challenges it involved.

Chief amongst the new experiences presented by the film was the opportunity to work with a young actress. I had only ever directed my peers or people older than me, so it was going to be a whole new ball game to work with a different style of energy. Luckily, we casted someone who has to be one of the most talented child actresses around, an eight-year-old named Beatrice Cooper. By contacting the Muncie Civic Theatre, I was put in contact with sixty-four parents around the Muncie area, all responding to my casting call for a young actress. So, while I entered the casting process a little stressed, I was relieved to find so many willing families in the community.

On a technological level, the story of *Uprooted* required me to put the camera in motion more than ever before. As the plot follows three roommates running across town using various means of travel, we had to adjust the camera motion for each specific storyline. Thankfully, through my work at the Digital Corps, my Director of Photography and I were able to use some cutting edge technology to allow us to stabilize the footage in several different ways. By bringing new technological pieces together, we were able to properly tell our story.

With all the pre-production completed, the actual production went rather smoothly. We of course ran into hang-ups on set but they were the usual affairs that I have learned to expect, such as running out of time and having to compromise shots, continuity errors, and crew morale dropping due to tiredness and hunger. Without my previous experiences at Ball State, I think these smaller obstacles would have amounted to larger problems that could have potentially halted production.

Overall, the largest challenge in production was wearing the many hats I had during filming. At times I felt like the task of producing a twenty-six scene short took my attention away from the more creative decision making, so there was an adjustment to make with that. Once we got on set, however, and all the planning had been completed, I was able to slip into a directing state of mind. Really, the amount of talent on our set cannot be downplayed; this film was made possible thanks to the talent and positive attitudes of the cast and crew. Although I am proud of my specific contributions, my achievements fall deep into the shadow of my monumental team.

Once out of production, I had all of the pieces I need to finish the initial cut. Thanks to non-linear editing, I had cut each scene just days after they were shot, which made the post-production process speed up. It was during this period that the project was shaped and I

manipulated the transition between genres. The final edit resembles what was written in the script pretty closely, so there were not massive changes in the story. Because of this, I do not think many visual editing techniques manipulated the tone; rather, the use of audio cued the audience for a shift in tone.

A large part of this is thanks to the music written and performed by Grant Ebert, a 2014 Ball State alumnus. We approached the climatic showdown with a scene of triumph for the central character, Tom, only to quickly strip that away when the plant belonging to this deceased mother is destroyed. Musically, the emotions accompany Tom's as the race progresses, which keeps the audience alongside him as we learn about his past. The music and audio cut out abruptly, which serves as punctuation to the visuals of the plant being run over.

Audio wise, all dialogue is cut out for several minutes as the atmosphere becomes more emotional and dramatic. This shift in storytelling helps the audience see the change in tone and raises the stakes, as there is clearly a distinction between the energetic race theme and the slow, thoughtful score when we dip into the flashback sequence.

Going into the project, I believed that there would be more of a contrast to the comedy and drama of the piece, rather than an organic transition from one to the other. Because of this, I do not see it as possible to re-edit scenes with contrasting tones as I originally intended. Instead, the project evolved into a subtler example of changing tone, which, on its own, exemplifies the possibility of switching genres.

With the final audio and music placed into the timeline, I was very happy with the final product. It was the joy of my semester to send a link out to the cast and crew to show off our hard work. Moreover, the film premiered at the 2016 Frog Baby Film Festival and received a great reaction. The audience laughed at all the right moments and responded audibly to the

emotional shifts in the story. I was thrilled that our experiment in genre mashing paid off, even to the point of picking up a few awards at the closing ceremony. I am massively proud of this film and the work that has gone into it. I believe it was a great success in balancing tone and I can already see the many ways I have improved as a filmmaker from this process.